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Surviving the War in Gaza

As the conflict in Gaza enters its fourth month, Crisis Group's Gaza-based researcher Azmi Keshawi, working with colleague Claudia Gazzini, tells the story of his family's daily struggle to survive this devastating war.

"We are still alive", Azmi said in a voice message, after enduring the terrors of another night of bombardment in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military has been pounding Gaza relentlessly since 7 October, the day Hamas carried out its lethal attacks in southern Israel. Azmi and his family are among the almost two million Palestinians driven from their homes by the bombing and shelling to crowd into smaller and smaller parts of this 365 sq km strip along the Mediterranean. Since the hostilities began, Azmi has been sending frequent messages to his Crisis Group colleagues updating them on the situation on the ground. Many of these have started with the sentence above. But as the war has ground on, and conditions in the coastal enclave grown ever more dire, more and more of them have led with another: "This was the worst night ever".

Voice messages are usually the only way for Azmi to share with the outside world what he's going through. Israel cut off its electricity supply to Gaza before launching its offensive, and Gaza's own generators have precious little fuel, so people have trouble keeping their mobile

phones charged. Combined with the gradual destruction of phone repeaters and the increasingly frequent communications blackouts, the power shortage has made regular calls from Gaza increasingly difficult. Often, when the bombing is close, it's too dangerous for Azmi to venture into the street to get an internet connection, and just as often, he's too busy trying to find food, water or shelter for himself and his family to think about communicating with anyone else. But from his voice messages, it is possible to piece together a rough picture of his ordeal and what's been happening around him. Taken together, his recordings offer a glimpse of how Palestinians in Gaza have managed to survive amid Israel's assault. In Azmi's telling, it mostly comes down to luck.

Residential buildings destroyed by Israeli airstrikes in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip. 16 October 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

A War Like No Other

Azmi's full name is Azmi Keshawi. He has been Crisis Group's Gaza-based researcher for some twelve years. He is hardly new to war, having reported for us on conflicts between Israel and Hamas militants in the strip in 2012, 2014, 2019 and 2021. Before joining Crisis Group, he witnessed the first and second intifadas (1987-1993 and 2000-2005, respectively) and the many incursions Israel carried out prior to withdrawing soldiers and settlers from Gaza in 2005 and the following year. (Although Israel disengaged from Gaza in 2005, it has retained full control of its borders, airspace and territorial waters, which is why the UN continues to consider Israel the occupying power in the strip.) Azmi also survived the first Israel-Hamas war, which occurred in

2008-2009, about two years after the Islamist movement took over Gaza. Together, these conflicts killed around 4,000 Palestinians in the strip. Many residential and office buildings were destroyed. Today's war, however, is on a completely different scale.

The war began on 7 October, when Hamas and other Palestinian militants broke through Israel's barriers around Gaza and attacked nearby Israeli towns, killing more than 1,100 people and taking some 240 Israelis and foreign workers hostage.

Azmi awoke at 6:30am on 7 October to the roar of a rocket barrage being launched from Gaza into Israel. "It was an unusual number, and the sound scared me", he said. He anticipated that morning that a new war was around the corner. Later that day, when details of Hamas's attack inside Israel emerged, he was sure the Israeli reaction would be ferocious. "I started thinking about how hard it would be on us, how much we were going to suffer", he recounted in early December. "But nobody thought it would be as horrifying as this".

Since 7 October, the Israeli military has retaliated with over 29,000 air and missile strikes … and killed more than 23,000 Palestinians.

Israel has also imposed a siege on Gaza that included cutting off not just electricity but also water, as well as severely restricting deliveries of fuel and food, which UN agencies say is starting to cause starvation. Hamas militants in Gaza have continued to fire rockets into southern and central Israel, though less frequently as the war has proceeded. Over 100,000 Israelis from the communities surrounding Gaza have been internally displaced since 7 October, evacuated under fire, some after over 24 hours in hiding. Many of the homes and infrastructure in the south were damaged or destroyed.

Many parts of Gaza may never recover. In the war's first few days, Israeli airstrikes destroyed Azmi's father-in-law's house north of Gaza City, close to the Israeli border. All of Azmi's in-laws and their children then moved into his apartment, a comfortable flat on the top floor of a high-rise building in the Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City. From there, he and his family could hear the bombing all around. "It was scary", he told us, "but as long as you heard the sound of the strikes you knew that you were still alive". One night, pieces of shrapnel tore into their living room. The airstrikes of that first week also flattened a 40 sq m cottage Azmi had built for his grandchildren on a parcel of land dotted with olive and citrus trees. "Now it is just a patch of yellow sand".

Those Who Moved South

On 13 October, the Israeli military started notifying the approximately 1.1 million residents of northern Gaza, including Gaza City, to head south of Wadi Gaza in the centre of the strip,

saying, “This evacuation is for your own safety”. Guessing that a ground invasion was in the offing, Azmi resolved to leave the same day, though the decision was agonisingly difficult. He and his family have many happy memories of that home, among them his daughter’s wedding celebration and his two sons’ graduation from university. It was the house to which he thought he would one day retire. “Knowing that you are going with only your clothes, leaving everything else behind, was a very sad moment for us”, he said. Azmi later discovered that an Israeli tank had fired shells into the building’s façade, leaving gaping holes just below his apartment. The building has suffered structural damage, which likely means that he and his family will be unable to return. Another flat Azmi owns in Gaza City, where one of his sons was supposed to move after getting married, is in a similar state.

The day Azmi left his home, he filled his own and his wife Jojo’s cars with essential goods. They drove south to Khan Younis with their sons Muhammed and Yousef, both in their twenties, and their daughter Maria, who is fifteen. In Khan Younis, Gaza’s second largest city, they found shelter in the house of a friend who was already hosting four other families. Jojo and Maria slept inside with the host family’s women, while the men had separate lodgings that comprised an indoor and an outdoor area. The weather was still warm, so Azmi and Yousef opted to sleep on the terrace. Afraid of the sound of airstrikes, Mohammed stayed inside with other male guests. Azmi’s elder daughter Abeer, her husband Motasem and their two children Omar and Judy, respectively 2½ and 1½, joined the family in Khan Younis. After a few days, Motasem moved in with relatives in Nuseirat, a refugee camp in central Gaza, leaving Abeer and the two toddlers with Azmi. Other members of Azmi’s extended family stayed in Gaza City, while still others moved elsewhere in the strip in search of relative safety.

People walking in the streets of Khan Younis surrounded by damaged buildings. 14 October 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

Those Who Stayed Behind

In many respects, Azmi is fortunate. He and his family had two cars they could use to leave Rimal when it was not too dangerous to do so. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians stayed in the north after the Israeli warnings to evacuate. Azmi also had the comfort of having cash in hand. He receives a regular Crisis Group salary and has been able to save. Over 50 per cent of his fellow Gaza residents were unemployed before 7 October, a number that has since risen to 90 per cent, and 80 per cent were living below the poverty line.

Why did so many people stay in the north after Israel told them to move south? There are several reasons, Azmi explained, the first being history. Most Gaza residents are refugees (or descendants of refugees) from the 1948 Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic), when some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their lands by the armed groups that would become the military of the state of Israel. That event is ingrained in the memories of those who lived through it and in the collective consciousness of everyone else. Due to the Nakba, Azmi said, "people hate to leave their homes and villages".

Secondly, no one imagined that the war would turn out to be as brutal as it did. When fighting has surged in the past, Gazans could often find shelter on the grounds of hospitals or in schools and other facilities run by the UN Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, which serves Palestinian refugees. But many of these facilities have come under fire in the present conflict,

with Israel claiming they are used by Hamas. In mid-December, Philip Lazzarini, UNRWA's head, said the agency had recorded "about 150 situations where our premises have been hit directly or indirectly".

Many families have been entirely wiped out.

The third reason most residents of the north did not flee immediately south is that most had no money. "One of my son Muhammed's best friends did not leave, because he could not afford to pay for transport", Azmi said. It is a 15km drive, and a ride for a person carrying only essentials like mattresses cost 700 to 1,000 shekels ($200-270) at the time. "The longer the war went on, the more expensive it became to move". Muhammed offered to pay his friend's way, but he refused. Muhammed later learned that this friend, Mohammed al-Dos, was killed in his home in Gaza City on 5 December along with thirteen members of his immediate family, including his elderly father and mother. Fifty more members of the extended al-Dos family had already been killed in two separate airstrikes earlier in the war. "Fifteen in one, and 35 in the other", Azmi said. "There are so many families that have been entirely wiped out".

A final reason was that people saw the journey south as unsafe. On the day Azmi left his home in Gaza City, an explosion destroyed a convoy of cars and trucks transporting civilians along the main Salahuddin road connecting the city to the south, reportedly killing 70 people. (Israel denied responsibility.) Azmi said news of that strike made people fear that they, too, would perish on the road. Reports also showed that 45 per cent of the over 5,000 deaths reported in the war's first two weeks occurred in southern Gaza. "People said, 'If we're going to die anyway, we'd rather die in our homes'", Azmi explained.

That said, hundreds of thousands left the north by foot in the following weeks. Footage on television showed people carrying blankets, mothers holding on to children and the elderly being pushed in wheelchairs. What disturbed Azmi particularly as he watched the scenes was that the white flags or cloths people were waving appeared to offer no guarantee of protection from Israeli fire, and he worried what would happen to him and his family if they would be forced to flee again. Several people were reportedly killed while fleeing, even those bearing white flags. A former neighbour of Azmi's, a young woman who lives in his building, recounted her own ordeal in mid-November to him. Despite being instructed by Israeli soldiers to leave the building with white flags, her family and other neighbours were shot at. Another person in her group, an elderly woman called Hala Khreis who was walking with her five-year-old grandson, was killed.

From Khan Younis to Deir al-Balah

Despite Israeli reassurances that the south would be safer than the north, airstrikes followed Azmi's family wherever they went. On two occasions, they narrowly escaped death. The first time was in Khan Younis on 21 October. An Israeli airstrike hit an empty building next door,

reducing their own living quarters to ruins. Muhammed was buried under the rubble and seriously injured. Fortunately, the other members of the family, Azmi included, were not there at the time: Azmi and Yousef were out buying food; Maria was at the far end of the house; and Jojo, Abeer and her kids had just stepped outside to meet Motasem, who was visiting from Nuseirat.

Azmi remembers that strike as one of the most frightening moments of his life – up to that point. At first, he did not know what had happened to Muhammed. Arriving civil defence personnel dug his son out from under the debris and rushed him to Khan Younis's main medical facility. Azmi found him there, getting an MRI. "Only then did I realise he was still alive". Muhammed had a fractured skull and liver trauma. The doctors stabilised him, but after 24 hours told Azmi to take him home, as they needed the bed for more urgent cases.

On 21 October, an Israeli airstrike hit a building next to the house where Azmi's family was staying in Khan Younis. His son Muhammed was buried under the rubble and seriously injured.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

Their lodgings in Khan Younis gone, Azmi and his family were compelled to move again. They decided to drive to Deir al-Balah refugee camp in central Gaza. Distant cousins had offered to host them in a two-bedroom flat, where two other relatives of Jojo's and their respective families were also sheltering. Abeer and her children joined her husband's family in Nuseirat. Azmi had to carry Muhammed, who could not move on his own. Azmi remembers the chilling fear of having to leave his son behind should they be alerted of the possibility of an airstrike on their new way station. "If we had to evacuate in a rush, we might not be able to take Muhammed with us, because we would not have been able to move him". They managed to stay put in Deir al-Balah for almost a month, allowing Muhammed to recover enough to be able to

walk. The apartment was "well-furnished", Azmi recalled, but "we were sleeping in the hallway or in the living room". They all shared a bathroom, but there was no running water.

The second near-death incident befell Azmi's daughter Abeer, her husband Motasem and their two children in Nuseirat on 30 October. It was a replica of what had happened a week earlier in Khan Younis: an airstrike hit the house next door, knocking down the outside wall of the one where Abeer and her family were staying. Again, happenstance saved them: Abeer and the kids were sitting on the opposite side of the house, so they had three inside walls to protect them. The next day, Azmi went to Nuseirat and brought his daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren to Deir al-Balah. The two-bedroom apartment became even more crowded. Meanwhile, Motasem's relatives in Nuseirat continued to live in their damaged residence, patching the walls and windows with plastic sheets.

In those days, victims of airstrikes arrived at Gaza's hospitals in what seemed an unstoppable flow. A few days after Muhammed was hurt, Azmi visited the Shuhadaa al-Aqsa hospital in Deir al-Balah. Ambulances were barrelling in, bearing the injured, the dead and in some cases just body pieces in plastic bags. "It was a scene you can never erase from your memory", he said. That day he saw doctors, including his brother-in-law, operating on patients without anaesthesia, sometimes stitching up the wounded on the floor.

Growing Shortages

In Deir al-Balah, airstrikes were not as frequent as in northern Gaza or in Khan Younis. Azmi's main challenge there was finding food. He had to drive to Khan Younis to purchase staples like pasta, rice, tomato paste and milk powder for his two grandchildren, but the stores ran out of these basic goods in subsequent weeks. The price of flour skyrocketed. "A 25kg bag of flour used to be 45 shekels ($12); now it's 200 shekels ($55)", Azmi said on 17 November. Salt, "which was the cheapest thing on the face of the earth" at 25 cents a kilogram, now cost $5, if one could

find it at all. There was no longer any sugar. Fresh vegetables grown in Gaza, like tomatoes and cucumbers, were still available, as were dried beans.

Empty supermarket shelves in Deir al-Balah. 4 November 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

But there was a shortage of cooking gas, so even for those who had the ingredients, hot meals were a luxury. “We were having hot meals only once or twice a week”, Azmi said, adding that on those occasions they “cooked some of the staples, rice or macaroni, which don’t use much gas. … We ration it, so that we have enough to boil milk for the kids or just for coffee and tea”, he explained.

Bread was particularly hard to find. In early November, people had to line up for five hours in front of the few working bakeries to purchase a few loaves. Two weeks later, after tens of thousands more displaced arrived from the north, bread lines in southern Gaza became ten hours long. Beyond the influx of displaced, what caused the food shortages was the fact that only a trickle of supply trucks were arriving in Gaza from Egypt. Israel had stopped fuel deliveries, which meant that bakeries could not power their ovens; as a result, most had long pulled down the shutters. Israel had also closed its crossings into Gaza. The only operational one was in Rafah, along the Egyptian border, but only a few dozen truckloads of humanitarian aid were coming through each day. (At present, both Rafah and the Kerem Shalom crossing from Israel are operating, but no more than 200 trucks bearing humanitarian aid are entering Gaza daily.) Before the war, at least 500 truckloads would come in every day, while needs have

grown manifold since then.

Displaced Palestinians queue for bread in Khan Younis. 23 October 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

Finding water was another difficulty Azmi faced in both Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah. There was no running water anywhere in Gaza, as Israel had cut the power supply, which meant that most pumping stations and desalination plants could no longer operate. When he could find it, Azmi would fill two 18l jerrycans with desalinated water for cooking, washing and drinking. In Deir al-Balah he managed to secure what locals call "sweet" water (from Gaza's aquifer) from a seller carrying plastic tanks on a donkey cart. A two-cubic metre-tank refill of water cost a hefty 100 shekels ($20). But the real currency of exchange, which ensured that the cart owner would go to the house where Azmi's family was staying every few days, was gasoline. Azmi was able to buy gasoline from a friend to trade for more sweet water. "We consider ourselves lucky", he said.

Azmi and his family also were able to eat at least once a day. Meals were simple – a bit of bread with tuna or zaatar, maybe a little macaroni with tomato paste. Still, he and his family were eating better than most Palestinians in Gaza, who could not afford to buy food at wartime prices. They were also much better off than those who had stayed in the north, where residents risked being shot if they headed outdoors to search for food.

Palestinians fill bottles of water from carts in Deir al-Balah. Difficulties in delivering aid have produced dire food and water shortages. 31 October 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

From Deir al-Balah Back to Khan Younis

By mid-November, airstrikes started picking up in Deir al-Balah, an urban area that had been calmer than other parts of the strip until then. On 14 November, four airstrikes hit the centre of the refugee camp, not far from where Azmi and his family were staying. “A few people were killed in each strike. The last one was ten minutes ago, just 200m away”, he reported that day. Their relatives’ apartment was in “a very old building, and we were afraid it would also collapse”, he added. Once again, a feeling of deep insecurity gripped Azmi.

Communication blackouts lasting up to 36 hours made things worse. Not having a phone or internet connection was “scary as hell”, said Azmi one November night, more harrowing than the bombing itself. “[Without phone lines] you don’t know if your loved ones are safe or if they need help”. If they did, there was no way to call an ambulance or civil defence workers. One of Azmi’s cousins died later that month after being injured by shelling in northern Gaza. His cousin’s family could not reach anyone for help. It is possible that even had phone lines been operational, his cousin would have died. Ambulances in the north could not enter besieged areas to evacuate the wounded.

Azmi’s stay in Deir al-Balah ended abruptly on 19 November. The owner of the house where he had been sheltering told him to leave because he needed space for relatives arriving from the

north. Azmi was caught off guard. "We left at 8am. It was a cold and rainy day. We had no idea as to where to go", he said. It was their third time on the move. Azmi left Jojo and the kids to wait in one of their cars while he drove farther south in the other to look for a place to go in Rafah or Khan Younis. But he couldn't find anything. "It was a moment of despair", he said. A last resort would have been an UNRWA shelter, he said, but these were already packed, and the living conditions were far worse than what Azmi had experienced in the shared houses. People had to queue for hours to use a bathroom. Illness was festering, he said.

Eventually, luck was again with him. A friend in Khan Younis agreed to put him and his family up in his house. The Israeli army, claiming that Hamas leaders were hiding in (or underneath) Khan Younis, was shelling the area constantly. "I knew I was moving from a relatively safe area to a less safe place", Azmi said. "But it was still better than just being in a car in the middle of the street. That was just terrifying".

A Week-Long Pause

Soon after Azmi arrived in Khan Younis, a week-long ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Hamas went into effect. Israeli bombing and army manoeuvres in Gaza stopped completely, as did Hamas rocket fire, starting on 24 November.

The ceasefire, or what was called a "humanitarian pause" to underscore its temporary nature and limited purpose, resulted from weeks of mediation by Egyptian, Qatari and U.S. diplomats. During the pause, Gaza residents could safely step into the streets. Many, including Jojo, had not left their shelters for days. The first day was a Friday, the start of the weekend. Fridays are usually quiet, "but because this is a pause in the fighting, the streets are full of people", Azmi reported. The weather was warm, and the sky was clear. Azmi saw traffic police on the roads and government inspectors checking for price gouging in the market.

Parents took their children to play by the sea. Other people visited families and friends who had made it to the south. Azmi visited relatives in Rafah and Deir al-Balah. Phone service throughout the south was also re-established, so that those who lacked transport could at least place calls. Everyone shared stories of what they'd been through and received word of loved ones they'd left behind.

Azmi said he ran into people he had not seen in twenty years. "Everybody comes and hugs you or shakes hands", he said, because "they are so happy to see people they know". Everyone had lost family members and friends, so "anyone who knows you starts considering [you] as a new family member or a new friend".

No one could go back to the north to see what remained of their homes.

Yet no one could go back to the north to see what remained of their homes. Azmi said many

wanted to make the trip, but news spread that the Israeli army, which had surrounded Gaza City, was not allowing people through. A few men who attempted to pass through the main checkpoint south of the city were shot.

The news from northern Gaza was devastating. In late November, Azmi said, "Every landmark we know, every famous place is gone". Israeli forces destroyed Gaza's long-defunct legislative assembly in mid-November, and after capturing the Palace of Justice, the strip's main court house, they blew it up. Nor had mortar fire and airstrikes skipped over the big supermarkets, like Metro and Carrefour.

People used the days of calm to stock up on food, but not much was available in the market, Azmi said. The queue for cooking gas was 3km long, despite the larger number of trucks entering through Rafah during the ceasefire. As far as Azmi could ascertain, the explanation was that half the cargo was going to the north, while much of what stayed in the south was bottled drinking water. Azmi started making his own bread on a gas-burning stove.

Those who were hunkered down in UN shelters – with no money at all – fared much worse. A few people told Azmi that they had even less food than before the ceasefire. "UNRWA used to give us one meal a day, but during the pause they stopped giving us even that", one told him. Almost everyone Azmi talked to said the ceasefire offered no relief from hunger. There were more beggars in the streets.

Of course, everyone hoped the war would end, so "they could reassemble their shattered lives", Azmi said. But the ceasefire was not extended. In the middle of the night on 1 December, Azmi sent the following recording: "I stayed up until five in the morning hoping to hear confirmation that the ceasefire was renewed for an eighth day, but unfortunately the only thing I heard was the sound of drones back in the sky".

Surviving Fire Belts

On the morning of 1 December, Azmi heard bombing "loud and clear" in different parts of Khan Younis, followed by wailing ambulances. That afternoon, an airstrike hit an empty lot near where he and his family were staying. Once again, it was only luck that spared them. Motasem was in his car only 30m from the impact, but he was unscathed. Airstrikes intensified rapidly soon after. That night was "a horrible night in Khan Younis – big booms all night long", Azmi said.

The following day, the Israeli army announced the start of ground operations in and around Khan Younis. It issued notices to residents to move to Rafah or an area called Mawasi it had designated as a "safe zone". Azmi considered his options. He feared going to Rafah, because airstrikes had killed many people there the day before. As for Mawasi, it was a seaside strip of agricultural land close to the Egyptian border. It had no shelters, no schools and no services. Azmi instead moved with his family to the southern periphery of Khan Younis, hoping to be at a

distance from combat. He joined seven other families who were sharing a three-bedroom apartment that Azmi's friend who had hosted them inside Khan Younis had put at their disposal. "He is a good friend", Azmi said. "We took the gas stove and the gas canister with us, so we could keep making bread there".

It was not a good choice. The following days were among of the worst of the war, Azmi said. Israeli troops had entered Khan Younis from the east, while unleashing "fire belts" – a continuous stream of air or missile strikes on a single target or line of adjacent targets. Israel had used such fire belts frequently in the north, but now it was happening right above Azmi's head. They went on for three consecutive nights, all night long. Every night was worse than the one before, he said. On 3 December, he sent only this message: "We are still breathing". But he was starting to crack: "I am out of choices. They killed 800 people indiscriminately since yesterday morning. I no longer know what to do". This figure refers to the death toll in the entire Gaza Strip that day, as reported by the local health authorities. The following night, the airstrikes were so close to the family's lodgings that Azmi was not sure they'd wake up in the morning.

The following day, they decided to leave Khan Younis. The only remaining option Azmi saw was to pitch a tent in Rafah, the southernmost city that Israel had also designated a "safe zone". He told Yousef to buy whatever materials they'd need for a tent. Yousef set it up on a tiny square of land he had found some 150m from an UNRWA base that had been turned into a temporary shelter in Mawasi, on the outskirts of Rafah. It was 5 December, and this move was their fifth since the war had started.

Displaced Palestinians cooking food in makeshift structures outside the logistics base of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in al-Mawasi, in the southern Gaza Strip. 10 December 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

In Rafah and Mawasi

Before becoming the site of the war's largest tent city, Mawasi was known as the breadbasket of the Gaza Strip. When Israeli settlers populated the area (they were evacuated in 2005 as part of Israel's disengagement from Gaza), they grew organic vegetables and flowers there, mainly for the Israeli export market. After the settlers' departure, Palestinians continued to grow greens but could not export them due to the blockade Israel imposed after Hamas took over administering the strip in 2007. Vegetables from Mawasi were what Azmi and his family had been consuming over the preceding weeks. But these had become scarcer and far more expensive by the day, as the number of displaced Gazans arriving in Rafah rose exponentially.

Displaced Palestinians gathering wood for cooking outside the UNRWA logistics base in al-Mawasi. The shelters are overcrowded and fuel imports into Gaza are restricted, leaving many without access to essential necessities.10 December 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

Azmi's 3x6m tent in Mawasi took two days to build. It consists of a wooden frame and a plastic cover. It can withstand a downpour. Azmi and his family didn't move into it, though, because after they arrived in Rafah, acquaintances of Motasem's offered to house them in a storage shed they owned. The family gratefully accepted the chance to have a roof over their heads. In turn, Azmi put his tent at the disposal of a large family sheltering in an adjacent, more ramshackle, one. It was a mutually convenient arrangement reassuring Azmi that his tent would not be taken by others. Yet Azmi ruefully noted that the storage shed's roof was unreliable: on the first night of heavy rain, it leaked, leaving their mattresses and blankets soaked through and through by morning.

Rafah, meanwhile, is far from being a safe zone. Right after moving there, Azmi and his family experienced no major bombardment. But their sense of safety was fleeting. When Azmi woke up on 6 December, he discovered that a quadcopter drone – a remotely operated aerial vehicle fitted with a rifle – had fired at his wife's car during the night, leaving a large bullet hole near the rear windshield. Had they struck the family's lodgings instead of the car, the bullets would have easily penetrated the asbestos roof under which people slept.

In the following days, airstrikes picked up again. On 11 December, Azmi heard a loud bombing, thinking it was nearby. But the strike turned out to be 3km away. It killed 21 people. The night

before there had been another strike, "only 200 to 300m away from us", killing eleven and injuring scores more. On 22 December, he said: "The other night they bombed a mosque in Rafah", adding that he had learned that this strike had killed over a dozen people inside a minivan that had picked up passengers at a bus stop just across the road. On 10 January, a strike on a building three blocks away from his shelter killed fifteen people.

Displaced Palestinians gathered outside the UNRWA logistics base in al-Mawasi. 10 December 2023.
CRISIS GROUP / Azmi Keshawi

The Journey Ahead

Azmi and his family remain in the storage shed for now, while the tent in Mawasi remains Plan B should they have to pack up again. There are over one million people now living in Rafah – four times the area's pre-war population. People make camp in whatever empty space they can find. Because it is overcrowded, food is even more scarce than in the towns. Living conditions are "the worst of the worst".

As bad as the situation in Rafah is, Azmi's greatest fear now is that he and his family will be forced out of Gaza entirely. There is nowhere else to flee inside the strip. South of Rafah there is only the border with Egypt and its Sinai desert. Some Israeli politicians have suggested that this is exactly where the population should end up, floating the idea of pushing the Palestinians of Gaza into Egypt. Officially, Israel has denied it plans to make such a move, and its officials have publicly talked of "voluntary emigration", but Israeli diplomats have tried to gauge international support for it. Cairo and other Arab capitals have expressed vehement opposition

to the scheme, as has Washington.

“We are praying this will not happen”, Azmi said. “Our life is in Gaza. All that we made in these years, basically all our past life, our history, is in Gaza”.

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